

Out of Nowhere

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Editor's Note: Seven crewmembers survived an accident in which an AH-64A landed on top of their UH-60A aircraft. The two pilots, two crew chiefs and three passengers in the Black Hawk escaped death; however, the two Apache crewmembers were killed and both aircraft were destroyed in a post-crash fire. One of the Black Hawk pilots agreed to share his story of that tragic night. What you'll read comes from the standardization instructor pilot's account he gave only hours after the incident. We're publishing his story here with his permission and approval, and we're grateful he's sharing his lessons learned.

Our mission that night was to conduct a night visual meteorological conditions logistics and passenger transport mission while an AH-64A, flying trail, provided armed escort. We were the lead aircraft, a UH-60A, in a flight of two conducting a night formation flight approach to the Forward Arming and Refueling Point while using night vision systems. We approached the runway from the west at a 60-degree angle, flying a heading of approximately 90 degrees. Once we intersected the runway, I turned right and flew a heading of 150 degrees down the runway toward the taxiway leading to the FARP. I decelerated and performed a descending left pedal turn to the taxiway. Our main landing gear was about a foot off the ground and the tail wheel had already touched down when I felt the aircraft being pushed down and to the right.

Bam! Did something just hit us? And then there was an explosion. When I looked out my door, I immediately noticed two things: my rotor blades were gone and an Apache rocket pod was lying on the ground.

Suddenly, there was another explosion and fire on our left. I exited the aircraft and ran about 30 feet from the Black Hawk and looked back. Our aircraft was already on fire. I found one of my crew chiefs, who told me he'd accounted for all our crew and passengers and moved them away from the aircraft, except the other pilot. Then I saw the other pilot beating on his door, trying to get out. I ran back to the aircraft and found him crawling over the center console. I helped him get out and we ran, not looking back.

The aircraft exploded as we were running away. I found the rest of the crew and passengers about 50 yards from the Black Hawk. Of the seven crew and passengers, four were hurt but able to get themselves away from the aircraft. Although firefighters showed up almost immediately, they couldn't do much about the fire with ammunition exploding and 30 mm rounds flying in every direction. I asked if they'd found the Apache; I hoped they were able to taxi or fly away.

I went back to the injured Soldiers and found some were going into shock. We thought one had a broken leg or hip and one a broken arm or shoulder. My crew chief and I started first aid and within minutes ambulances arrived. All crew and passengers were transported to the hospital at the other end of the airfield runway.

I was in the hospital getting checked out when I heard the Apache's tail section had struck our main rotor system from above and neither of the crew survived. The fire had been so big that we didn't realize it was two aircraft burning. I couldn't believe it. This was supposed to be a simple transfer of three passengers and a box of unmanned aerial vehicle parts.

Lessons learned

There are four things to be learned from this tragedy. First, incorporate mixed formations into readiness level progression, especially for night operations. A mixed formation doesn't have to be dissimilar aircraft; it can be aircrews flying the same aircraft from two different units. Know the capabilities and limitations of the other aircraft in your formation.

Second, brief and practice lost visual contact procedures. Radio discipline is secondary to communication in emergencies. If you lose sight of each other, plan for altitude separation and rally points. Light signals don't work well in urban environments.

Third, practice emergency egress procedures. Our enlisted flight instructor had recently completed the flight instructor course at Fort Rucker, Ala., and was trained extensively in this area. In our pre-mobilization training, we trained emergency egress hard, landing in open fields and rehearsing duties in the event of a crash. Don't forget to consider your actions if ammo is cooking off around your rally point. Move far away from the crash and get low to the ground.

Lastly, ensure you and your aircrews receive combat lifesaver training. This training is critical in combat; I don't know too many people who've deployed and didn't use first aid in some type of situation. Don't do this training for yourself, do it for your Soldiers.

